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## The University in the community. The university's contribution to local and regional development by providing educational services for adults

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### Abstract

A modern university assumes more and more, besides the main traditional functions: of research, the didactic function, and the cultural one, a significant role within the community to which it belongs. The university's role within the community can be assessed according to the services through which it contributes to the local and regional development. A university with an entrepreneurial spirit maintains a strong connection with its social and economic environment by offering trainings in which individuals, different from students, might be interested. This is necessary in order to meet these individuals' need of continuous training and development in the new paradigm of a knowledge-based society. The university's community involvement presupposes the management of the available capital of competence and expertise in order to develop services oriented towards the economic environment, the public administration, the civil society.

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### 1. Surpassing the Humboldtian model of university

For a long time it was believed that, according to the famous model of university conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, research and teaching were the main functions of this institution. Fundamental scientific

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research is conducted within the university, the professors' main duty being that of producing science and of training future researchers. As a result, a decisive criterion in assessing a university is represented by the scientific performances of its professors. A professor's worth is assessed first of all according to his/her scientific prestige. This prestige is acquired through the number and the quality of his/her publications. As a consequence of the results of his research, the quality of his didactic performance will also increase. It is believed that only a successful researcher is able to well teach an academic course. The basic idea of the Humboldtian model could be synthetically formulated thus: teaching is an institutional function, while research is a professional function. Through courses and other didactic activities, the professor performs a service in favour of the institution, which in its turn provides him/her with the resources necessary to the fulfilment of his/her research projects.

The Humboldtian model has been target to numerous criticisms during the last decades, it being considered that the priority given to research has generated a discrepancy between the fulfilment of the professional function, and the fulfilment of the institutional function. This discrepancy is a result of the fact that professors tend to concentrate their effort upon research, and, thus, to reduce or even leave their didactic activities on a secondary level. Much more so since the results of research are significant in promotion and in increasing the professional prestige. Today, it is almost impossible to ignore the context in which the university is part and how it is related to it. Even universities focusing on advanced research seeks to accommodate the needs of society, the economic and social context, the aspirations and expectations of all and each of the social actors separately. It is generally accepted that universities perform three basic functions: research, teaching and learning and providing services to the community under conditions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom (UNESCO, 2009). Contemporary idea of the university, showing Marga (2009), involves a university wisely relate to knowledge, which shall in addition to its traditional functions and a pronounced cultural function, but in addition to these functions has a strong role in the part of the community. The University has come to be regarded as a place of education, an area of scientific research, cultural, artistic and reference pillar integrative approach: university - administration - community made up of economic and social actors. Consequently, beyond the Humboldtian model, many other models have been proposed as a teacher, of which I remember now the teacher cosmopolitan defined in relation to the multiplicity of local actors and a focused vision the whole society, not just to what happens within the institution (Bourdieu, 1988; Coenen-Hunther, 2007).

The mission of the University must always be redefined, so that it answers successfully to the growing complex needs of the society which supports it. The University must, on the one hand, reorganise itself according to criteria of performance and competitiveness in the field of scientific research, and, on the other hand, assume new responsibilities in the professional training of the young generation: 1) provide the young with the education necessary for citizenship in a democratic society; 2) pass on the values of the shared culture, and redefine that culture; 3) contribute in the improvement of the people's lifestyle conditions and in the development of the community. Analyzing the implications of the research process in universities, in line with the Bologna Elen and Verburgh (2008) believes that universities and their members must contribute to the development of the society and to disseminate and promote the culture of civic values. By assuming such responsibilities, it is clear that the current European University must define a new strategy of development for itself. The problem resides with adapting the University, by restructuring it, to the new requests of the society.

Nowadays, European universities face challenges that are characteristic of the new century: academic training available for the masses, continuous training and development, the increased importance of post-academic studies, the globalisation of the market of qualifications, education becoming international, growth in the number of providers of higher education for adults, diversification of the sources of information, the expansion of the system of distance learning, the promotion of constructivist learning, the transition from the education of individuals to the education of persons. Abandoning the exaggerated elitism and opening the university to various categories of public-target was an evolution generated, on the one hand, by the pressure of the development of the knowledge-based economy. In this economy, the human capital capable both of producing, and of efficiently using knowledge is essential. On the other hand, it was generated by the increasingly powerful tendency of the educational systems to promote new principles with regard to the development of human resources, tendency easily identifiable at the level of managerial politics, and that of the measures taken in order to facilitate access to higher levels of education. The university must give up the claim of imparting knowledge only by way of an elitist education, in favour of a highly pragmatic and pluralist approach, where the emphasis falls rather on the process of continuous learning during one's lifetime, from which will result the accumulation of competences capable of supporting the competitiveness of

individuals on the labour market (Giddens, 2000).

## **2. The role played by the university in the local and regional development**

In the contemporary world, regions are considered to be the new ‘units’ of development and of economic power. It is an undeniable reality that, at a European level and not only there, the communities which record an accelerated rhythm of progress are those that find regional and/or local solutions to global challenges and problems. As the European countries orient their production towards segments of market with a big added value due to the products of superior quality, and to the ‘knowledge-intensive’ services, the easy and fast access to knowledge and to the new technologies is vital.

Marga (2005, 2009) defines the university as an institution legitimized through cultural foundations, and which takes an active position in the context where it belongs. At present, it finds itself in a complex situation, being caught between the attraction of classical rationalism and the rational awareness of the changes in modern society, which determine changes within the university itself. The autonomous decisions of the university depend directly upon the demands of the market. The duty of the university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to clarify the situation of the higher level education, taking into consideration the current life conditions, and to offer new answers for the relationship between education and the labour market.

The active involvement of the University in a region becomes increasingly important for its sustainable development, answering to its particular needs (Clark, 1998). Although governments still have significant responsibilities in what concerns the politics of research and education of most countries, universities assume more and more decisional attributions, including those regarding involvement on a local and regional level. Modern universities incorporate more and more the contribution to the economic, local and regional social development as part of their mission, as function additional to the didactic and research ones. Smart (2009, p. 307), for example, argues that „it is necessary for universities to collaborate with regional or local business to develop new and innovative business”. A first aspect tied to the role of the university in the local and regional development is represented by the accommodation of the university to the specific of the socio-economic and cultural environment to which it belongs, on the one hand. On the other hand, it is also represented by the environment’s accommodation to the university. In this sense, a redefinition of the process of superior education is necessary, by combining the significations of academic merits, the maximum of economic and social impact, and the social inclusion. Thus, universities must gradually take into consideration a great variety of actors and political-administrative local and regional centres, not only those at the level of the central administration (Paterson, 2001). In some cases, however, the establishment of the objective of becoming a regional institution can be met with reluctance, although on the other hand regional partnerships might constitute a way of attaining a recognised international status both in what concerns research, and education. Regional orientation might also influence the signification of the University’s traditional functions. These functions have known a dynamic change with time, redefining in their turn the mission of the university, in the sense of making the most of its potential to contribute in the economic, and local and regional social development.

The model of university with entrepreneurial spirit has been increasingly advertised during the last decades, which has opened the way to the active involvement of universities on a local and regional level (Clark, 1998, 2001; Kitagawa, 2005). For example, Pawlowski (2009) believes that one of the most important factors to influence local and regional development is the entrepreneurial behaviour and the innovative spirit of the inhabitants, the University being assigned an essential role in their cultivation. According to Pawlowski’s opinion, also shared by many others, the university with an entrepreneurial spirit is the one that maintains a strong connection with its social and economic environment, but the purpose of this connection resides only with the internal development of the university. A more complex model of this type of university, which tries to change its external environment through educational, cultural, civic, and economic initiatives and through cooperation with various institutions appertaining to that environment, would presuppose a University radically altered in itself due to this interaction (Marga, 2010). One of the functions of such a university is the establishment of its own environment, both social and economic, and the first step towards the fulfilment of this function consists in influencing, to a smaller or bigger extent, the changes which occur in the environment where it functions. In extreme situations, it is even capable of influencing the total transformation of the environment according to the needs of the knowledge-based economy.

In the contemporary world, universities are increasingly perceived as producers of knowledge, innovation, technology, and labour force qualified from an economic point of view, thus contributing to the creation of wealth

and means necessary for regional, national, and international competitiveness. The contribution of universities in the economic and social development of the regions to which they belong must be assessed according to their role as providers of education (initial education, and continuous training and development of the human capital), but also as producers of knowledge and technology, as economic entities, as institutional actors trained in various networks (Boucher, Conway & Van der Meer, 2003; Thanki, 1999; Charles & Benneworth, 2002).

European Commission (2004) assumes the point of view that among the challenges we have to face the academic community include: identifying existing infrastructure disruptions of production and dissemination of knowledge, anticipating the expectations of the economic environment and strategic location of universities in relation to them in terms of education and research, identify opportunities for effective networking with the business and the ways through which one can appropriate the funding sources of education and research, harmonization of incentives designed to determine optimum transfer of knowledge quickly and university relations - media business, adapting institutional architecture, management practices and organizational culture of universities to the demands required by new paradigms of performance in the field. The Europe 2020 strategy, the EU reiterates the role of universities in regional development. In this respect, the *European Commission's Practical Guide* (2011:5) presents four mechanisms by which universities can contribute to regional development: 1) Enhancing Their regional innovation through research activities; 2) Promoting enterprise, business development and growth; 3) Contributing to the development of regional human capital and skills; 4) Improving social Equality through regeneration and cultural development.

The issue of the university's role in the regional and local development is tackled with great interest, firstly by international organisations the size of the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development*, and even by institutions belonging to the level of higher education, eager to promote their own examples of best practice. Thus, OECD (2007) suggests a number of criteria which should be taken into consideration when evaluating a university's role in the local and regional development: 1) the creation of knowledge through advanced research and technologic transfer; 2) the transfer of knowledge towards society through education and the development of human resources; 3) the cultural and civic development of the community, which can generate optimal conditions for innovation. The indicators according to which the fulfilment of such criteria can be assessed might be: 1) the number of partnerships between universities and various local and regional actors; 2) the contribution of academic research to the innovations in the region; 3) the number of national/ European research centres established with the aid of the University; 5) the number of important companies attracted by the region because of the university; 6) the role of the universities in generating a regional capacity of action within an increasingly competitive global economy; 7) the role of academic education in the development of the human capital; 8) the contribution of the universities to the social, cultural, and environmental development. The indicators could be constructed by starting from the declared mission of each university. But this endeavour might require a preliminary definition of the concept 'the mission of the university', as well as of its functions (Marga, 2010). Moreover, each university should define its own mission, as well as the level of exercising it on different levels, from the local one, going through the regional and national one, and up to the international one.

The University's community involvement through the training and development activities intended for adults subordinates itself to the idea of continuous education. Several documents of educational policy assumed on a European level contain explicit directives in this sense. Thus, the Press Release after the Prague Summit of the Ministers in charge of higher education: *Towards a European Area of Higher Education* (19<sup>th</sup> May 2001) contains the clear advice of encouraging lifetime learning (continuous education), considered to be an essential element in the area of European higher education. This document shows that, in a future Europe built on a knowledge-based society and economy, the strategies of continuous education are necessary in order to cope with the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies, to amend social cohesion, and to provide equal opportunities and life quality. Moreover, in the Press Release of Berlin: *The Realisation of the European Higher Education Area*, passed after the Conference of the Ministers in charge with higher education (19<sup>th</sup> September 2003), its contribution in the transformation of continuous education in a reality was underlined as important. This transformation could be made possible by making use of various flexible teaching methods, opportunities, and efficient learning techniques. At the same time, the necessity of improving all the citizens' opportunities according to their abilities and aspirations in order to allow them to follow the continuous teaching programs available in higher education was emphasised. Even in *The Press Release after the Ministerial Meeting in London* (18<sup>th</sup> May 2007) it is requested of the Bologna Follow-up Group to amplify the dissemination of the best practice cases, and to militate for a common understanding of the role of higher education in the continuous one.

### 3. The Babeş-Bolyai University's community involvement

The Babeş-Bolyai University firmly assumes the mission of contributing to local and regional development from a social, economic, cultural, and political point of view, through an active involvement consistent with the needs of the community. According to the *Strategic Plan 2012-2015*, the Babeş-Bolyai University assumes the complex role of ensuring a successful education, an innovative scientific research foremost on a national and international level, but also that of offering sets of specialized services to the community (*The Strategic Plan of the Babeş-Bolyai University 2012-2015*, p. 5). Thus, the University is established within an institutional frame where solutions for the permanent changes in society and for the complex problems of the current world are taken in a participative and democratic manner, with competence, responsibility, and honesty.

In *The Strategic Plan of the Babeş-Bolyai University 2012-2015* (pp. 8-9), the directions for the realisation of a fruitful relationship with the community through the services rendered are clearly drawn, in order to make a consistent contribution to the local and regional development:

„Strategic goal 1 – Making use of the capital of competence and of the highly specialized expertise by developing services destined for the economic environment, for the civil society, for the public administration:

- The initiation and the development of new programs of fundraising, and the financing of didactic and research activities by attracting funds for programs, projects, themes oriented towards major problems, defined together with the economic environment, with the civil society, and with the public administration.
- The initiation and the development of a division of commercial services and advice destined for the economic environment and for the public administration, the funds thus raised being afterwards assigned for the support of didactic and research programs.
- The increase of the level of public dissemination and of the use in society of the results obtained from the research activities.
- The founding of a think-tank for debating fundamental themes regarding the directions of development, the major problems and challenges of the Romanian society, and of the contemporary world.

Strategic goal 2 – Emphasizing the role of the university as major factor of culture and education:

- Forming partnerships with cultural and art institutions at a national and international level with the purpose of organizing joint events;
- Organizing events and cultural manifestations, both of local and regional interest, and of national and international interest;
- Engaging the university as partner of the municipality in its endeavours of obtaining the title of European Capital of Culture.

Strategic goal 3 – Increasing the university's community involvement:

- Active engagement of the university in the debates of the civil society;
- The initiation and the support of a Corporate Social Responsibility program for the identification, promotion, and implementation of actions for bettering the lifestyle conditions of the under-privileged groups and communities;
- The university's involvement in the community through the actions of its extensions, and through the management of the existent capital in the relationships with its partners from the economic environment, the civil society, and the public administration, i.e. the Alumni”.

For the fulfilment of such desiderata, the Babeş-Bolyai University has conducted, and will continue to conduct a series of programs, such as: „The University in the community. Continuous education in the service of the community”. The project's objectives are consistent with the objectives and the strategic directions of *The Strategic Plan of the Babeş-Bolyai University 2012-2015* in what concerns the community services, and, respectively, the increase of the university's community involvement, making the most of the capital of competence and highly specialized expertise through the development of services destined for the economic environment, for the public

administration, for the civil society, as well as in emphasizing the role of the university as a main factor of education and culture. The beneficiaries of this project are persons belonging to the local community, interested in the continuous education, and implicitly the institutions which they are part of.

The project: „*The University in the community. Continuous education in the service of the community*” aims to increase the university’s community involvement by opening courses of general interest to interested persons, different from students, in order to meet the needs of continuous education existent in the local community. The general objective to be followed is the insurance of open access to lifetime quality education in the context of the local community. The specific objectives refer to opening the university to the education needs of the community, adjusting the education offer to the requests of the local community in constant change, in what concerns various professions or working places.

#### 4. Conclusions

The impact of universities upon the development of the communities to which they belong is a significant one. The cases where the Spin-offs started by the universities have generated most of the growth of the economy based especially on high technology are numerous. The academic policies in what concerns the entrepreneurialism of the members of the didactic corpus encourage the technologic transfer (know-how), and the tight relationships between the University and the economy. At the same time, the contribution of the University to local and regional development can also be understood in terms of forming and strengthening formal and informal connections in order to attain social, civic, and cultural objectives. Thus, the universities which benefit from the inter-organizational networks of the regions to which they belong can exercise a significant influence upon the local and regional development.

Each university has its own mechanisms for quality assurance and continuous improvement of services, including all articles and community relations component. We believe that universities should be open to the needs of the community, offering degree programs in the fields of economic and administrative environment required by organizing training centers to be used jointly by the university and external partners, initiating training programs or providing promotional opportunities the university partners. Partnership with universities can bring various players access to qualified human resources in accordance with their needs, and the ability to use research universities for innovation or improve products and services.

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